



UNIVERSITY OF  
FLORIDA

# IFAS EXTENSION

**Friday's Feature**

**By**

**Theresa Friday**

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## **Spittlebugs are hopping around**

They're back. For those of you with centipede lawns, you need to be on the lookout for spittlebugs. From past experience, many of you are already familiar with these insects and the damage they can do. This insect is primarily a pest of lawns, especially centipede lawns, and heavy infestations can cause damage.

The spittlebug feeds on many crops, ornamental plants, weeds and lawn grasses. Ornamental plants commonly infested are holly, redbud, blackberry, pea, peach, honeysuckle, and morning glory. Its grass hosts include bermuda, St. Augustine, centipede, and bahia. However, centipede is the species that is most susceptible to injury

Adult spittlebugs are about ¼ inch long and are black with two red stripes across their back. Their eyes and abdomen are bright red. Most homeowners notice these insects as they mow the yard. Mowing disturbs them and they fly up on you or the mower.

The immatures, or nymphs, are usually encased in a white, frothy mass that provides protection from desiccation and predators—thus the name spittlebug. Many locals know this foamy mass as “snake spit”.

Spittlebugs have needlelike mouthparts. They feed by sucking juices from the plant. Nymphs are particularly damaging to lawns because they must remove enough fluids to form their protective spittlemass. As a result, the total amount of feeding for such small insects is considerable. Nymphs usually cause patches of turf to yellow.

Research has shown, however, that the adults cause the primary damage. When feeding, adults inject a toxic salivary substance. Severe infestations can even kill the lawn. In addition to feeding damage, the spittlemasses themselves can give the turf an unsightly appearance.



**The adult spittlebug is black with two orange-red stripes and the nymphs are encased in a frothy mass**

If you suspect that you have a spittlebug problem in centipedegrass, look for these clues. First, spittlebug feeding causes a purple, yellow and/or white stripe running vertically on the grass blades. Typically, only half the blade will show discoloration. In heavily infested turf, the discoloration blends so that the whole lawn appears off-color.

The second clue of a heavy infestation is the lawn will actually feel squishy when walked on, as if shaving foam were underneath. Examine these areas for nymphs. Spittlemasses are usually located deep within the grass or in the thatch. If you open the spittlemass you can actually see the nymph.

But the most obvious clue of an infestation is seeing a large number of the spittlebug adults. Be sure a proper diagnosis is made before spittlebug control efforts are begun.

The first line of defense in spittlebug control is to disrupt the humid conditions essential for their development. Avoid over irrigating the grass. Nymphs cannot survive dry conditions. Excessive thatch can also increase the humidity at the soil level. If a thatch problem exists, dethatching may help in reducing spittlebug problems. The best time to dethatch is in early spring. Do not dethatch in the summer because it is too stressful on the grass.

There are several insecticides available to homeowners. The ones registered in Florida for use against spittlebugs in turfgrass include those containing bifenthrin (Scott's Max Guard), cyfluthrin (Bayer Advanced Lawn and Garden Multi-Insect Killer), and lambda-cyhalothrin (Spectricide Triazicide). Be sure to read and follow all label directions.

To improve control, mow and dispose of clippings before an insecticide is applied. Irrigating before treatment will also aid in control and help prevent grass damage. Granular insecticides may not be as effective as liquid formulations. It is best to monitor or apply insecticides late in the day when nymphs are higher on the plants than during the hot midday.

After control is obtained, the area should be periodically rechecked. Reinfestation can occur quickly since the spittlebug has at least two generations per year in Florida.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others. For additional information about all of the county extension services and other articles of interest go to: <http://www.santarosa.fl.gov/extension>